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“Ride on! Ride on, King Jesus!”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Passion/Palm Sunday

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Isa. 50:4–9a; Ps. 31:9–16; Phil. 2:5–11; Lk. 19:28–40

O Lord Jesus Christ, on this day you walk ahead of us on your way to Jerusalem. And with your disciples, we follow behind, sometimes frightened, sometimes uncertain—yet compelled by your bravery and your compassion. So startle us again this Palm Sunday morning with your compassion, your courage and your love, and give us strength to live our lives as you lived, faithful to God our Creator. We pray in your holy name. Amen.

Fleming Rutledge is an Episcopal priest who is also a well-known author. She has written a book called *The Undoing of Death*. In the book, she tells about a sign in the window of a greeting card shop: “We Make Easter Easy,” one-stop shopping for all the eggs, flowers, cards, and bunnies you might need. That’s exactly how we prefer it, do we not? Christianity without a cross, Easter without the messiness of Good Friday. This is the toughest stretch of the journey we make with Jesus. It’s not easy to hear him cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Remove this cup from me, but not my will, but your will be done. Father, forgive them for they know not what they’re doing.”

And yet, the week begins with celebration, waving the palm branches:

All glory, laud, and honor to Thee, Redeemer, King!
To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.¹

¹ Theodulph of Orléans, “All Glory, Laud, and Honor,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 88.

It is a powerful story. He comes from rural Galilee in the north to the city of Jerusalem to join the thousands of pilgrims who flock to the city to observe the Passover, the day the Jews celebrate their deliverance from Pharaoh. The crowds are festive, excited, patriotic.

Jesus comes into the city with determination. And as he arrives in the company of his friends at the outskirts of the city, he begins to act peculiarly, deliberately: “Go into the village, get the colt, bring it to me.” What is this about? He’s been walking for days—why the donkey for the last few miles? At the other end of the town, there was another parade going on: the Roman governor had come from his palace in Caesarea to take charge, to show them who was really in control. He would come in, riding on a colt. Jesus was coming from the other direction. There could be no doubt about the political ramifications: which parade are you going to be in? Which king are you going to shout to? Who will have your allegiance?

The crowd, already giddy with patriotic fervor and love, knew exactly what was happening. At last, someone in power is coming! The Messiah is here! So they strip branches from trees and the shirts off their backs to make a royal carpet for the king. New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says it is a clear and intentional Messianic gesture. Whatever Jesus thought about himself and his mission before today, he is taking his stand, claiming his identity, committing his life, putting it all on the line.

The crowd grows in size and intensity. Some Pharisees tell Jesus to quiet them down: “You will get in trouble, the Romans know what’s going on, they’re not going to put up with this. They’re worried about peace and order, about security. Pontius Pilate has a reputation for responding to public displays with harsh, repressive violence.” They too knew exactly what Jesus was doing, and maybe they thought it was blasphemy. Maybe they were concerned about him—either way, what he was doing could get him killed.

Jesus said to them, “If these were silent, the stones would shout out.” In other words, God will have a witness in this world. You can be afraid of it; you could be

worried about what the consequences will be. But God will always have a witness; the very stones themselves would cry out.

This is a day of irony and swirling emotion: a day of contrasts between momentary triumph and looming, foreboding tragedy. And what I love most about it is Jesus' reaction to all of this, his leadership, the role he played.

He did not have to go to Jerusalem, after all. There is evidence that his friends tried to talk him out of it. They knew there would be risks, risks to his safety. No fewer than five times Luke tells us that Jesus was determined. He set his face, just as it was prophesied in Isaiah, to go to Jerusalem. He went ahead of them to Jerusalem. The question before us today is, will we follow him on this route? Will we sit and watch or will we follow him? Why should we risk our own security to get involved with this Jewish rabbi?

Recently, I had a conversation with one of the leading Christian theologians from Africa, John Azumah. He is a Presbyterian minister from Ghana and teaches at the London School of Theology. Before he became a Christian, he was raised in a Muslim home. His parents and siblings were Muslim. When he became a Christian, his family rejected him. Since then, there has been reconciliation. He is very sensitive to the relationship between Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

He was asked what drew him to Jesus. What drew him to leave the Muslim faith and become a Christian? Without hesitation, he said, "It was his compassion." Jesus looked over the city and wept. "Would that even today, you know the things that made for peace." Jesus laments over Jerusalem, and this is a clear sign of his compassion. There are laments all through the Bible: in the Psalms and Isaiah. God laments, we are told. And now there is Jesus, weeping over a city.

A lament is a voice of love and profound caring. It is a vision of what could have been and grief over what is not. Jesus wept, which reveals the depth of his compassion for those people whose lives were in danger because they knew not what would make peace.

If we followed Jesus because of his compassion, what do we lament in our time? What do you weep about in Durham? Children are dying from lack of food, lack of support, gun violence. Last Wednesday morning, I heard a mother give a testimony about her son, who was shot to death. We held a vigil for them. She said, “I didn’t want to come because I didn’t think anyone cared about another black boy getting shot here in Durham. But then I came. There were people there who cried with me. They hugged me, and there were white people there that cared about my son and cared about me. I haven’t been the same since the day of that vigil. They still called me and made a difference in my life.”

What do we weep over as we follow Jesus?

The other thing that attracts me to him is not only his compassion but also his courage. He set his face with determination to fulfill what God had called him to do. He was aware of the risks. He was aware that he was pushing the envelope close to the edge.

I’ve always been inspired by Dag Hammarskjöld. He was the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953-1961, when he was killed in a plane crash. He wrote: “I don’t know Who—or what—put the question, I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *Yes* to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.”² His journal, a spiritual diary, was published after his death, and it has been a welcomed treasure to people who are trying to find their way in the world.

About Palm Sunday, Hammarskjöld wrote, “A young man, adamant in his commitment, who walks the road of possibility to the end without self-pity or demand for sympathy, fulfilling the destiny he has chosen...³ still uncertain as to whether he was indeed ‘the one who shall bring it to pass,’ but certain that the answer could only be learned by following the road to the end.”⁴

² Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York, Knopf, 1964), p. 205.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 69

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Dag Hammarskjöld saw in the example of Jesus' courageous decision the only way to fully live our lives: by making difficult decisions, taking risks, starting an arduous journey without knowing for certain how it would come out.

He wrote, "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."⁵

That reminds me of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and teacher, who fought Hitler, was imprisoned, and executed. He wrote from his prison cell, "I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life.... Later, I discovered that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to believe."⁶

Only by giving of yourself to others and to things that matter that you learn how to live. I think that's what Jesus meant when he told us whoever would gain his life would lose it, but whoever loses a life for my sake in the gospels will gain it.

Will we fall in behind him today? Will we watch his example of compassion and courage? Will we watch as he lives fully by giving his life away, holding nothing back?

Watch him because he bids you and me, his church, his followers to follow into this risky, ambiguous world, to get our hands dirty in politics and economics, to cry out for those who have no voice in our community, who are taking the biggest lick during this economic downturn. Follow him into the world, this world, and go in his name.

See as he leads us to serve our neighbors in his name: the poor, the marginalized, those we can't seem to figure out how to adequately educate and house and care for the children. Follow as he leads us, in his name, into the world he so transparently and passionately loved that he laid down his life.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 22.

Let us follow him. Watch as he lives in compassion and courage, and know what that might mean for you, whatever you are facing—uncertainty about your future, the possibility of danger and loss, disease and death. You face the option of risking or not risking, the choice between commitment or opting for the safe and the secure. It's a tough choice, but he's promised to go with us, every step of the way.

In our Officers' retreat yesterday, Walt Barron looked up the word *pilgrimage*. He Googled it, and a pilgrimage is a journey, sometimes long: a sacred journey that has a destination. When you follow him, when you go on this road with him this week, we join the hymn writer, Samuel Crossman, who put it this way beautifully:

Here might I stay and sing,
No story so divine:
Never was love, dear King
Never was grief like thine.
This is my friend
In whose sweet praise
In all my days could gladly spend.⁷

Let it be so with us. Amen.

⁷ Samuel Crossman, "My Song is Love Unknown," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 76.